

The contribution of European vocational training policy to reforms in the partner countries of the European Union

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SUMMARY

This article provides an overview of recent developments in EU vocational education and training (VET) policy, and of the issues and challenges faced by VET systems in the Western Balkans, Turkey, and other countries covered by the ‘wider European neighbourhood’ policy. The purpose is to emphasise the relevance for these countries of the EU messages, instruments, benchmarks and principles that are part of the Copenhagen process, but also the interest expressed in the process by the countries themselves, particularly those currently implementing reforms to meet the challenges faced by their own systems. But to maximise the impact of the EU messages and instruments certain conditions must be met. To make these messages and tools relevant to each country, it is essential to conduct a process of policy learning. Partner countries must also place their reforms within comprehensive lifelong learning strategies, in partnership with all actors in the field.

Key words

Education and training policy, vocational education and training, lifelong learning, policy learning, institution and capacity building, social partnership

Introduction

The development of human capital is increasingly recognised as a means of facing the challenges of globalisation and the knowledge society. It lies at the very heart of the challenges posed by the transition towards a market economy and democratic society, and of preparing the accession of new countries and potential accession countries. It is also an essential factor of the transition process embraced by countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, for setting up a Euro-Mediterranean area of free exchange in Maghreb and Mashrek countries, and for the integration of these regions

(except Central Asia) within the new European neighbourhood policy. It is in this context that education and training systems are being questioned in all partner countries of the European Training Foundation. Vocational education and training, especially, is attracting reflection and far-reaching reform.

In their drive to reform, these countries are expressing a growing excitement about policy developments in EU education and training that are linked to the Lisbon strategy, and about the diverse paths taken by EU Member States. The recommendations made and instruments deployed in the wake of the Copenhagen Process [3] have especially raised interest [5]. National authorities have expressed an interest in integrating the messages and mechanisms of the European Union within their own policies. These developments also enjoy the backing of programmes of European assistance and partnership, and the support of the European Training Foundation.

Although it is too early to evaluate the impact of these measures on the education and training systems concerned, we can draw some initial conclusions from experiences gained and reforms introduced, allowing us to reflect on how to make better use of the mechanisms set up by the European Union for future enlargement and how to develop a more effective policy vis-à-vis neighbouring countries. We need to answer the following questions: How can partner countries make the best possible use of the diversity, methods and approaches employed within the Union, both at Community and national level? How can these approaches contribute to the systemic change towards democracy and the market economy? Is the presentation of European messages within partnership and assistance programmes the most efficient way to meet the needs of these countries? Should European VET policies be drafted with a view to being extended to partner countries? How can we create a closer partnership in vocational education and training between the European Union and these countries? To what extent can this new EU process of mutual learning benefit the development of policies in partner countries?

Above and beyond the daily activities of the Foundation on behalf of these countries, these questions were on the agenda of a conference held in Turin in June 2005, entitled *What's good for Europe is good for its neighbours* [16], as was the work done by a consultative committee in June 2006 [11], which devoted a workshop to the question of *Learning from diversity: vocational education and training developments in the EU and its partner countries*. Based on these precedents, this article attempts briefly to point to recent changes in EU vocational education and training policies, to evaluate the diversity of the instruments and approaches adopted and examine their relevance for VET systems in partner countries, to assess their contribution to a stronger *mutual policy-learning process* and, based on the experience of the ETF, to draw lessons and raise new questions.

Education and training policies in the European Union

EU education and training policies have evolved considerably since the Luxembourg Council of 1997 as an element of the European strategy for employment. An even greater change followed from the Barcelona Council of 2002, which was based on the Lisbon strategy of 2000. Education ministers focused on three main objectives: improving the quality and efficiency of education and training systems in the EU; ensuring that these systems are accessible to all; and opening education and training to the world outside the EU [4]. Ministers decided to make changes of the basis of the *open coordination method*: exchanging experiences, working together toward common goals and drawing lessons from best practices in third countries.

As a result, ministers have cooperated more closely on vocational education and training since the 2002 Copenhagen Declaration [3]. Their cooperation aims to encourage voluntary links within the area of vocational education and training in order to promote mutual trust, transparency and the recognition of qualifications and competences – essential factors in improving citizens' mobility and access to lifelong learning. The following priorities were listed in the Declaration: *the European dimension, transparency, information and guidance, the recognition of competences and qualification and quality assurance*.

In addition, the *Education and Training 2010* programme covers not only formal education and training but, increasingly, non-formal learning, vocational teaching and training, and higher education. This integration corresponds well to the idea that vocational education and training is increasingly having an impact on all levels of education. The fresh impetus given to the Lisbon Strategy by the March 2005 European Council clearly showed the need to link growth more closely to employment and to refocus the Strategy on human capital, the knowledge society and lifelong learning. The integrated guidelines for growth and employment [7] adopted by the Council in June 2005 firmly anchor the priorities set out in the work programme *Education and Training 2010*.

Within the open method of coordination these policy objectives have been accompanied by a working method using a number of instruments, references, principles, measures, indicators and benchmarks, and good-practice databases. These are all linked to a number of priority themes, such as lifelong guidance, key skills for lifelong learning, the efficient use of resources, promoting education and training activities, transparency, mobility, the recognition of qualifications and the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning, as well as the training of trainers and quality assurance.

A number of tools were put in place, including the *Guide for developers of lifelong career guidance systems*, *Europass*, the *Joint Quality Assur-*

ance Framework for vocational training, the EQF (*European Qualifications Framework*), and the ECVT (*credit transfer system*), which are currently undergoing testing. Apart from these common tools, a series of databases of good practices catalogue the very diverse policies and initiatives implemented in the Member States. These include the *European Toolbox for promoting the best use of resources*, the general presentation of good practices and policy initiatives for ‘*an environment that nurtures continuing training: making training more attractive and strengthening the links between work and society*’, and a database on lifelong learning. Mention must also be made of the national Europass centres and the European Network for Quality Assurance in vocational training. Equally, a number of indicators and benchmarks have been developed to monitor progress within the European Union and at the national level in terms of attaining the set goals. These include the rate of early school leavers, the attainment level in higher secondary education and the percentage of adults in lifelong learning. These indicators are particularly relevant for measuring the progress of reforms in vocational education and training.

All these policy instruments are at the disposal of candidate countries, which are already associated with EU policies and have started to use Community instruments designed to implement the *Education and Training 2010* work programme. With the exception of *peer-learning activities*, systematically introduced in 2006 to intensify efforts and promote mutual learning, all other measures are available to all countries wishing to modernise their systems, meet set standards and practices of the Community or promote worker mobility between their country and the European Union.

Vocational education and training in the partner countries: the challenges ahead.

The diversity of partner countries

The partner countries working with the Foundation are very diverse in terms of political organisation, economic development, social and civil conditions, demographics and culture. If we are to believe the UNDP’s Human Development Index of 2004 [24], which contains data on life expectancy, education levels, participation in primary, secondary and higher education, and GDP per capita, the countries concerned range from 23rd (Israel) to 123rd (Morocco), as shown in table 4. The recent Member States, with which the Foundation worked up to 2004, range from 27th (Slovenia) to 45th (Latvia). The Western Balkans range from 44th (Croatia) to 73rd (Albania). The Russian Federation ranks 65th, while Turkey ranks 92nd. The countries of Central Asia and the Transcaucasus range from 80th (Kazakhstan) to 113th (Uzbekistan). The greatest variation is to be seen in the countries of the MEDA area, which range between 23rd (Israel) and 78th (Lebanon) to 111th (Egypt) and 123rd (Morocco); but also within Eastern Europe, where Belarus ranks

67th, Ukraine 77th and Moldova 114th. A closer look, however, shows that these countries face common problems in vocational education and training. All are faced with challenges similar to those of the EU Member States, though on a different scale and in very different environments.

While progress can be seen in several countries, on average the performance of the education systems is inferior to that of EU countries. In certain cases (according to international studies and indicators) it is even deteriorating. Admittedly, this global view hides a plethora of diverse situations. For example, the last PISA 2003 survey [19] on the maths performance of 19-year-old pupils placed Russia at the same level as Hungary and Italy and slightly below the average for OECD countries, while Serbia and Turkey are clearly lower, with Tunisia at the bottom of the scale of the 15 countries surveyed – at the same level as Brazil, as can be seen in Table 1 below. Moreover, Russia's results with regard to scientific education are clearly improving while reading results are worsening, in contrast to the situation in its neighbours Poland and Latvia. The results of the TIMSS surveys [1] on performance in maths and science of 8th grade pupils (around 14 years of age), which were conducted in 1995, 1999 and 2003 reveal a more complicated picture, as shown in Table 2: though Russia features quite high on the scale, it fell behind between 1999 and 2003 both in maths and science, Romania and Bulgaria are at the middle of the scale, below other European countries participating in the survey, while FYROM, Jordan and especially Tunisia are lagging far behind. The results of the PIRLS 2001 survey on the reading abilities of 10 year olds also show major differences, with Bulgaria at the top of the scale of the 35 countries surveyed, Russia, Romania and Moldova in the middle, Turkey and FYROM clearly below average, with Morocco at the bottom of the scale, as shown in Table 3.

In such circumstances, vocational education and training do not receive priority action or adequate funding, even though this is the education sector that has suffered most severely from the transition to the market economy, industrial restructuring and the wars in former Yugoslavia [12]. The task is immense when one considers the need to modernise programmes and adapt them to the needs of the labour market and the knowledge economy; to develop adult training and prepare for lifelong learning; to create bridges between different occupational areas for young people and adults; to open up pathways between vocational, general and higher education; to establish parity of esteem between occupational paths and general education; to ensure proper coordination between the ministries and active cooperation of all actors involved at national, local and regional levels; and to establish an effective social partnership on education and training issues.

Table 1. PISA Average performance of the partner countries of the European Training Foundation and the new EU Member States (former partner countries)

	Maths 2000	Maths 2003	Δ	Reading 2000	Reading 2003	Δ	Science 2000	Science 2003	Δ
Czech Republic	510	527	+17	492	489	-3	511	523	+12
Slovakia		505			469			495	
Hungary	478	479	+1	480	482	+2	496	503	+7
Poland	470	490	+20	479	497	+18	483	498	+15
Russian Federation	469	474	+5	462	442	-20	460	489	+29
Latvia	452	486	+34	458	491	+33	460	489	+29
Bulgaria	430			430			448		
Romania	426			428			441		
Serbia		432			412			436	
Turkey		417			441			434	
Tunisia		359			375			385	
OECD average	494	496	+2	500	494	-6	500	500	0

Table 2. Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)

Average results on the scales of mathematics and science in eighth grade by country in 1995, 1999 and 2003 and differences in 2003 compared with 1999. The new Member States are indicated for purposes of comparison.

	Maths			Δ	Science			Δ
	1995	1999	2003	2003-1999	1995	1999	2003	2003-1999
Hungary	527	532	529	-2	537	552	543	-10
Russian Federation	524	526	508	-18	523	529	514	-16
Slovakia	534	534	508	-26	532	535	517	-18
Latvia	488	505	505		476	503	513	+11
Lithuania	472	482	502	+20	464	488	519	+31
Israel		466	496	+29		468	488	+20
Slovenia	494		493		514		520	
Bulgaria	527	511	476	-34	545	518	479	-39
Romania	474	472	475	+3	471	472	470	-2
Moldova		469	460	-9		459	472	+13
Cyprus	468	476	459	-17	452	460	441	-19
FYROM		447	435	-12		458	449	-9
Jordan		428	424	-3		450	475	
Tunisia		448	410	-38		430	404	-26

Source: TIMSS [1]

Table 3. Average performances in reading (*Progress in International Literacy Study*, PIRLS 2001) in the partner countries of the European Training Foundation as well as in the new EU Member States (former partner countries)

	Average result	Number of years spent at school	Average age
Bulgaria	551	4	10.9
Latvia	547	4	11.0
Lithuania	540	4	10.9
Hungary	537	4	10.7
Czech Republic	536	4	10.5
Russian Federation	531	3 or 4	10.3
Slovakia	522	4	10.3
Romania	512	4	11.1
Israel	507	4	10.0
Moldova	505	4	10.8
Slovenia	503	3	9.8
Cyprus	490	4	9.7
Turkey	452	4	10.2
FYROM	445	4	10.7
Morocco	358	4	11.2
International average	500	4	10.3

The difficulties of reforming vocational education and training in the new EU Member States

At this point, it should be pointed out that the somewhat flattering performances obtained in the new Member States, as shown in the tables above, do not reflect the situation in education and vocational training. The experience of these countries – with which the Foundation worked up until the ‘big bang’ enlargement of 1 May 2004, and up to the end of 2006 as regards Bulgaria and Romania – clearly shows the inherent difficulties of introducing necessary reforms. Although the worsening shortages in qualified labour are hindering a return to growth, vocational training pathways have not changed in line with needs. Unemployment especially affects secondary school leavers, including those with a vocational qualification, while higher education offers the possibility of much better-paid jobs in the future. Moreover, companies are still not prepared to invest in vocational training, either for young people or for adults; employers do not encourage attempts

to train or retrain. As a result, most students and families are turning away from vocational education courses, preferring to take their chances with higher education. This means both university (which is still highly academic) and new institutions – some public but most private – whose short courses offer key skills, especially those required by the service economy and referred to most often by employers.

An upcoming study by the World Bank on initial training in the eight new Central European Member States advises governments to progressively scale back investment in vocational education in secondary schools and to move instead towards the post-secondary level, explore alternative financing methods to organise 'practical' training in companies, and encourage companies to finance equipment and students to finance their studies (including through loan schemes). To many people this is a sign that the reforms introduced so far have, at least partially, failed; as a result, they look to European policy instruments to kick-start the system. If this development shows the difficulty of reforms in the 'enlargement countries' and those covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy, it also reveals the importance to these countries of enhancing cooperation that is based on the European tools.

Problems and challenges facing the vocational education and training systems in the partner countries

Initial vocational education and training is facing particular difficulties in the Meda countries, which are facing strong demographic pressure and dwindling public resources. The partitioning of pathways is preventing global strategies from being defined [17]. This is equally important in the Western Balkan countries, where reform depends on support programmes and funding, principally from the EU and the World Bank, at a time when young people are turning en masse away from vocational education pathways. For certain countries one could even ask whether reforming initial vocational training is a real option today, considering how little is currently invested in it [13].

Adult training, including training on the labour market, is equally problematic. While adult participation in lifelong learning was 9.7% on average in 2005 in the EU25 (the EU benchmark is set at 12.5% for 2010), the figure was 2.3% in Turkey, 2.1% in Croatia, 1.6% in Romania and 1.3% in Bulgaria. Reskilling the workforce, though necessary, is particularly difficult due to low or irrelevant levels of training [21], limited national resources, a lack of motivation among employers, a high proportion of micro-enterprises in the economy and a lack of appropriate tools for skills development. This problem is particularly acute in countries with falling populations, i.e. most of the Western Balkan countries (except Albania and Kosovo) and East European states. High unemployment also makes enterprises reluctant to fund training for their workers since the labour market is in a position to satisfy most of their needs for skilled labour. The move towards decentralised, autonomous educational institutions is blocked by the insufficient transfer

of public funds to the local level and to attitudes formed by a long tradition of centralisation. Yet decentralisation is also sometimes applied, mainly for political reasons, to levels where it becomes a byword for fragmentation. This is the case of FYROM, where full responsibility for primary, secondary and vocational schools was given to the municipalities following the 2001 Ohrid agreements. Similarly, since the 1996 Dayton accords, each of the 10 cantons of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Federation has had its own Education Minister. These factors have led to marked disparities in employment and training.

Although training programmes have been undergoing reform for a long time and pedagogic content and methods have seen some development almost everywhere – generally as part of pilot projects – their deployment in all fields and implementation in all schools is a very long process. Many vocational training courses are still not adapted to present conditions and do not correspond to the needs of the labour market. Teaching methods have not really changed; there is a considerable need for teacher training and much technical equipment is obsolete. Private training is developing mainly in fashionable niche areas, and the quality of the courses is occasionally more than doubtful. There is a general lack of qualification and certification frameworks. The components of the vocational training systems are highly fragmented and compartmentalised, particularly in Mediterranean countries. This considerably complicates any work on transparency, quality assurance and evaluation.

More generally, these countries suffer from a lack of transparency in managing their systems and from clientelism surrounding many decisions, especially on appointing school heads and awarding equipment grants. The introduction of both market economy mechanisms and democratic processes is of vital importance for modernising education and training systems. Institutions responsible for vocational education and training must be developed and reinforced at every turn – including among social partners.

Partner countries' interest in the European messages

The main challenges set in the area of vocational education and training in the European Union by the Maastricht Communication [3], i.e. *implementing reforms and increasing investment in education; improving the image and attractiveness of vocational pathways; achieving high levels of quality and innovation linking VET with the labour market requirements; taking into account the needs of the low-skilled; parity of esteem and links between VET and general education, in particular with higher education*, correspond exactly to the objectives stated earlier, even though the scale of problems to be solved is of another order and despite the need to take into account specific challenges.

This is why most of the partner countries have embarked upon ambitious reforms of their vocational education and training systems, usually within more general educational reforms. Many have also shown interest in following upon the European 'advances' in order to achieve these reforms.

For example, ministries of education and employment in the Western Balkans have expressed, in several joint declarations, a keen interest in reforming their education and vocational training systems on the basis of EU policies and instruments. In turn, the European Commission has encouraged these steps, as shown by the Communication *“The Western Balkans on the road to the EU: consolidating stability and prosperity”* [2] and the action plans prepared for each country in the Mediterranean area and Eastern Europe in implementing the neighbourhood policy strategy [8].

Apart from the reform programmes inspired by the wealth of experience in the EU, progress with *Education and Training 2010* and the Copenhagen Process has resulted in launching more targeted projects, either within support programmes and assistance from the EU, or through more limited campaigns for awareness-raising and dissemination activities, analysis, counselling and institution-building, in which the ETF was particularly involved. This has led to a learning process which we must now analyse more closely.

The ETF experience: lessons learned

To what extent is this Community experience useful in paving the way towards current reform and in involving all the actors concerned? Doubtless it is too early to make an in-depth evaluation of how European vocational education and training policies affect the partner countries. Nonetheless, we may draw some conclusions from the experience of the ETF. Our analysis concerns the content of the reforms, their implementation and the process of learning initiated by such activities.

We based our analysis on the awareness campaigns related to the Copenhagen messages, but also on activities for implementing lifelong learning strategies, national certification frameworks, quality assurance, sectoral approaches to qualifications and the development of apprenticeship training. We also took into account the ETF's monitoring of the Phare, Cards, Tacis and Meda [9] European support programmes, including in the new EU Member States. The analysis was also based on the conclusions of a conference held in Turin in June 2005 [16] where representatives of the partner countries tried to identify the obstacles to using Community instruments and points of reference when implementing vocational training reforms in their countries. Finally, we took into account the work of the ETF Consultative Group of June 2006 in a workshop dedicated to the impact of European vocational training policies on reforms in the partner countries of the European Union [11].

On the content of reforms

As seen earlier, on paper the message and instruments of the Copenhagen Process seem well adapted to solving problems in vocational training in the partner countries. They provide an overall approach, pointing to the weaknesses of the training professional systems and identifying the necessary reforms. Since these messages and instruments tackle the basic problems which affect vocational education and training in these countries and attempt to set realistic objectives, they can be expected to be effective – at the price, of course, of a much greater effort, compared to European Union countries. Such reasoning, however, is naive. It disregards the gap between these countries and the EU in terms of market economy and democracy and in the way institutions operate. This gap makes for difficulties which act as brakes on reform and can lead to a distortion of the European message.

Nevertheless, experience shows that under certain conditions ⁽¹⁾, European messages can act as catalysers, allowing an identification of the strengths and weaknesses of national systems, clarifying the strategic issues and identifying the appropriate political response. As argued by an ETF expert in a recent article [20] examining the implementation of national qualification frameworks in the Western Balkans, *'Measures addressing the main aspects of a national qualification framework are supported through the Copenhagen process and thus far have remained sufficiently broad to promote strategic directions without constraining local initiatives. This aspect is of prime importance in countries reviewing and reforming their education and training systems as it provides guidance and support which allows them to position themselves among a range of strategies without imposing a single or unique approach. In this regard, the material from Copenhagen may be used to guide reforms, thereby accelerating their reform process by shortening the amount of time taken in policy search for models or approaches that reflect mainstream trends in EU Member States'*.

But one should avoid considering these messages and instruments in isolation, without examining how they interact with other messages and with all components of reform in vocational education and training. Nothing would be worse than treating the messages from the Copenhagen Process as a series of technical recipes for introducing cut-price reforms. We could well ask whether the introduction of the Europass Certificate Supplement, to the exclusion of other more substantial measures, could make it possible to restore the image of vocational secondary schools in Poland and to stem the flow of pupils towards general education. The European Commission's presentation of the European Qualifications Framework clearly showed how the different messages from Copenhagen were interlinked. Besides, just as it is not desirable to consider the teaching of vocational education and training without placing it within the wider vocational education and training system in a given country, the Copenhagen instruments, including indicators

(1) Those implemented by the ETF as part of awareness-raising programmes.

and benchmarks, must similarly be considered as part and parcel of the Education & Training 2010 programme. This broader vision is also served by the integrative value of many of the tools proposed. An example is the European Qualifications Framework, which takes into account all the levels of qualification, including through higher education.

It is essential to create in each country a clear idea of the role of competences and qualifications in economic and social development, especially for paving the way toward the market economy and knowledge society, and to define an adapted strategy interlinking the various components of the education and training system and all levels of intervention. The six priorities ⁽²⁾ and the six key components ⁽³⁾ of the European strategy for life-long learning are an appropriate framework to follow, realigned, of course, in accordance to each country's circumstances.

Aiming for an integrated strategy also makes it possible to consider which is the best response to the needs for growth, development and social cohesion; how the various parts of the education and training system could contribute; which short-, medium- and long-term objectives should be set; and how the right balance should be struck between them. It also raises the issue of the public and private priorities and resources required to attain these objectives. This leads to reflecting on and organising interaction between initial and continuing training, between vocational training and higher education, between formal learning and informal and non-formal learning, between certification and validation of competences, between the respective roles of the State, the company and the individual, between the State and the social partners, between the different administrative levels, and between the State and local and regional representatives. Most of the partner countries suffer from weakness in adult training, in skills recognition, and from an imbalance between initial training and formal education (markedly higher than in the EU). This bolsters their interest in the European tools resulting from the Copenhagen Process, all of which place formal, informal and non-formal learning, as well as initial and continuing training, on an equal footing.

Here, the case of Estonia is interesting: a plan to relaunch vocational education and training, implemented in 2003, combined the establishment of a national qualifications framework, aimed at underpinning a policy for recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning, with the availability of considerable resources. Loans per pupil for vocational education were significantly increased, and secondary schools were encouraged to make loans conditional on student results and to attract new groups.

In Hungary, a project involving the implementation of a national certification framework is seen as a way to improve efficiency and coordinate

⁽²⁾ Value learning; Information, guidance and counselling services; investing more time and money in learning; bringing learning opportunities closer to learners; providing everyone with basic skills; supporting research into innovative pedagogy.

⁽³⁾ Developing partnerships, identifying learner needs, adequate resources, access for all, creating a learning culture and a search for excellence.

national training policies. It should contribute substantially to the preparation of a lifelong education and training strategy, along with a series of measures to encourage adult learning and training programmes.

In fact, each tool of the European armoury has a systemic value: the capacity to treat the cultural and societal foundations of the education and training systems and to make them evolve in the direction of the social market economy and democracy. It is important to draw the best from it; and to do so requires an understanding of the measures themselves as well as of their conditions and constraints. It should not be possible to build a national qualifications framework without also creating the conditions for a solid social partnership on training and qualification issues. Similarly, setting up an efficient vocational guidance system is meaningless without the active cooperation and support of schools and employment agencies. Promoting quality likewise assumes a vision which encompasses the learning institution and its environment, especially the labour market. In more general terms, it is advisable to avoid implementing quality assurance approaches in vocational education and training in a compartmentalised manner, with no link to the approaches deployed by education ministries, as is the case in some countries in the Meda area.

This all shows how important it is to pay attention to the way in which these 'European' approaches are presented and implemented by their promoters, especially the European experts chosen to finalise programmes of EU assistance. Paying lip-service to 'fashionable' concepts should be avoided. Too many activities are still being presented as measures to promote lifelong learning without seriously taking into consideration the global strategic context or necessary pre-conditions. One good example of rhetoric can be seen in the education strategy (in a lifelong perspective) adopted in 2006 by the Government of FYROM. This document, which puts all the onus on higher education and marginalises training, essentially takes up the most ambitious aims of the European policy and the Lisbon agenda while stating that in any case the State will gradually cut public financing for education and will leave it up to the municipalities and training institutions to provide for their own needs. Another example, unfortunately all too common, is that of seminars that bring together experts and representatives from the ministries to talk about the need for the involvement of the social partners without the social partners actually being present. In certain Mashrek countries, decentralised mechanisms such as public/private partnerships have been promoted in an authoritative, top-down manner, which contradicts their aims and jeopardises their success.

The national or local situation in which such measures are to be introduced must be examined carefully. It is the responsibility of European assistance and its experts to build and implement programmes taking full consideration of the local situation context and real needs in close collaboration with local and national authorities, who in return should contribute fully to this mutual learning exercise.

On the process

The conclusion of the enlargement process for ten new countries [14, 18] showed that European support programmes had not devoted sufficient attention or assistance in developing institutions capable of steering the transition to democracy and the market economy, nor in taking on board and using the experiences gained by the European Community. Similar problems, but at a higher level, are evident today in the candidate and potential candidate countries, as well as in other partner countries at an even greater distance from the European market economy and democracy.

But this is not purely a technical or institutional issue; it is also of a political and cultural nature. What is the real interest of governments in the European experience if not the possibility of a faster accession (for candidate and potential candidate countries) or of half-opening the door to accession (for 'neighbouring' countries). Apart from a rhetorical interest in such messages, to what extent are they ready or even capable of implementing measures that unsettle and even contradict the practices and work routine of their administration? The answer can be gleaned from the priority given to vocational training: as stated above, this is weak in most countries, if one examines public spending devoted to training. It can also be gleaned from the extent of dysfunction in implementing reforms; from the inefficiency and lack of transparency in managing available resources; and from the difficulties in establishing partnership and social dialogue on training issues.

Fortunately, many actors do have a genuine interest in seeing reforms introduced. They are the ones who will turn out to be the driving force behind the promotion and implementation of the European messages: the middle management in ministries, chambers of commerce and industry, trade union representatives, directors of vocational schools, heads of employment agencies, regional representatives. Many will use the rhetoric of the Summits to flesh out projects for raising qualification levels and for adapting the labour market to the needs of individuals and companies. This is why it is important to fully involve this category of people in European projects and to make them their main promoters.

It follows that an effective policy of awareness-raising and of integrating European messages into vocational training reforms should not be focused on a limited number of actors and institutions. On the contrary, it is important to involve a core group of responsible authorities and experts, representatives of the competent ministries (at the least, the ministries of education and employment), local and regional elected representatives, social partners and others playing a role in civil society, to work closely together, with a clear commitment on the part of the ministries involved. This core group should not only forge links with the tools derived from Copenhagen and the drafting and implementation of the Phare, Cards, Tacis and Meda programmes, and of European support programmes whose fragmentation is often an obstacle. It should also ensure the integration of pilot projects in education and training system reform by disseminating the outcomes

of these projects and mobilising all concerned. A major issue here is the central importance of *including teachers and trainers in the critical mass of stakeholders for reform* [15]. Being at the heart of implementing new programmes and new methods in schools, but also in contact with the school partners, parents, employers, municipalities and other interested parties, teachers and trainers are essential agents for implementing reform and related learning processes.

One of the ingredients for success is the existence and development of institutions to deal with the different dimensions of reforms and to maintain the necessary contacts with the European Commission, its specialised agencies and networks of competent experts and institutions within Europe and beyond. Unfortunately – as many admitted during the meetings in Turin mentioned earlier – partner countries show weaknesses in developing competent institutions, including in the area of research and expertise. In countries undergoing transition, research in education, formerly well-developed, was dismantled; rebuilding this capacity is still in its early stages. Those in charge often lack think tanks to interpret the advice and messages of international assistance and thus to help them make the best use of this assistance, in partnership with the actors concerned.

It is also important to combine top-down and grassroots approaches to make all involved responsible for the changes taking place. As one speaker complained at the meeting of the Consultative Committee (referring to the setting up of sectoral committees in Romania some 10 years after the initial steps for the reform of vocational training were taken), *'we started reform by building the roof before the walls and only now are we concerned with the foundations'*. The social partners must be fully involved in these processes if reform is to succeed and if the messages of Copenhagen are to be integrated and consolidated over time. This is how Romania is now planning to implement its national qualifications framework in the coming 5-8 years, Estonia and Hungary over the next 7, Croatia in the next 5 and Turkey over the next 3-5 years [6].

The learning process

Learning about policies is not just a copying exercise, nor does it involve applying EU instruments to the letter. The point is to understand the underlying principles, the inherent logic, of each policy or instrument and to determine how these principles and arguments could lead to a better understanding of the national context, identify realistic objectives and support necessary change. We call on those in charge at the national level, but even more so on those disbursing European assistance – especially experts implementing these programmes and those responsible for follow-up and evaluation – to keep this in mind when drafting new programmes.

Here, dissemination of good practice can play an important role, provided it becomes part of the learning mechanisms set up by the countries themselves. The aim should be to benefit global strategies that are equipped

with the necessary resources and to ensure the active participation of all concerned.

The mechanisms put in place within the European Union with the open method of coordination, and supplemented since 2005 by peer-learning activities, demonstrate that this learning does not just happen on its own. It is not enough to jointly set ambitious objectives and expect that each country will undertake the necessary effort. What applies for the European Union countries should be also considered for the partners, in the light of how far they are behind the EU (as highlighted by European indicators) and of how much ground they need to gain before they can achieve the objectives of their education, training and employment policies. To set the Lisbon objectives for the Western Balkans [2] means, at the very least, providing them full access to all tools and measures of European policy, including the opportunity for peer-learning activities – something which is lacking today. Taking note of this situation, the ETF has implemented peer-learning pilot projects, which have had interesting results in the Western Balkans as they covered a limited number of countries and targeted precise subjects that were undergoing reform [23].

Conclusions

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the EU has considerably developed its vocational education and training policy under the Lisbon Strategy and has helped to expand mutual awareness of policies in the Member States of the Union, especially through peer-learning activities. At the same time, reforms in vocational education and training have gradually taken on greater importance among the priorities of the governments of the partner countries, which have expressed a great interest in European policy – an interest fostered by new developments in EU foreign policy. Pre-accession aid and the European neighbourhood and partnership instrument have contributed to setting up a framework, within which the Union and its partner countries can create a reinforced mutual learning process in order to achieve reforms.

The Helsinki Communiqué (5 December 2006) on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training [3] indicated in its conclusions that *the implementation of the Copenhagen process and its priorities should be supported through a number of points, including the exchange of information, expertise and results with third countries, particularly those countries covered by the 'enlargement' policy and by the 'wider Europe neighbourhood' policy.*

Although it does not go as far as the Finnish EU presidency had wished when it prepared the December 2006 Council meeting (for which it had sent a questionnaire to the Member States [22] asking *whether the Copenhagen process or certain aspects thereof should be open to cooperation with third*

countries), the Helsinki Communiqué does open the way to new cooperation with the partner countries of the ETF.

Policies aimed at increasing the attractiveness and efficiency of vocational education and training systems, promoting learning for everyone, developing new models of governance with the full involvement of all parties as active partners, putting in place tools and approaches for greater transparency, mobility and flexibility and higher quality, also function as measures helping third countries to meet the challenges of globalisation, the knowledge economy and social cohesion. They can also extend and support partnerships between the EU and partner countries. Thus, Community approaches to education and training – including the open method of coordination – should not be seen as policy responses to challenges faced by the EU and by accession or candidate countries alone.

The work and the experience gathered by the ETF has shown that the proper implementation of these messages in the partner countries should not be taken for granted, and is all the more difficult in cases where the economy and society are still lagging far behind the EU's. It is important to take into account not only the differences between the countries concerned and the EU Member States, but also between the partner countries themselves. The experience of the new Member States clearly shows the wide range of situations across the Union. This diversity is even greater in the partner countries. Nonetheless, the messages from Copenhagen have already begun to take hold in some of these countries. Their systemic value has fired up awareness and acted as a catalyst for reform.

The continuation of these efforts now requires all concerned to work together and in partnership with the European Union; a global vision of the role of skills and qualifications in social and economic development; the implementation of real lifelong learning strategies; greater administrative support and more expertise in education and training issues; and more resources, in terms of both time and money. Partnership must exist at every level: between those to be mobilised, especially the social partners, but also between local and national actors and their European Union partners. This should be undertaken through joint learning activities, to guarantee a clear awareness of local circumstances and to anchor measures locally in order to achieve national objectives. We can only hope that the new European instruments for Pre Accession Assistance (IPA) [9] and support to the *European neighbouring policy instrument* (ENPI) [8] will be the right frameworks for such mutual learning and partnership. ■

Annex

Table 4. List of the partner countries by Human Development Index level

Rank	Country	Index
23	Israel	0.927
44	Croatia	0.846
54	(Bulgaria)	0.816
60	(Romania)	0.805
62	Bosnia and Herzegovina	0.800
65	Russian Federation	0.797
66	FYROM	0.796
67	Belarus	0.794
73	Albania	0.784
77	Ukraine	0.774
78	Lebanon	0.774
80	Kazakhstan	0.774
86	Jordan	0.760
87	Tunisia	0.760
92	Turkey	0.757
97	Georgia	0.743
99	Azerbaijan	0.736
100	Palestine	0.736
102	Algeria	0.728
105	Turkmenistan	0.724
107	Syria	0.716
110	Kyrgyzstan	0.705
111	Egypt	0.702
113	Uzbekistan	0.696
114	Moldova	0.694
123	Morocco	0.640

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